

Madam Chairwoman, Members of the Committee, Good Morning.

My name is Hillary Eley, I am the President and Chief Operating Officer of the Branch County Area Chamber of Commerce. In a small, rural community we must focus our economic development efforts – both capital and human resources – on the investment that will give us the greatest long-term return. The Branch County Area Chamber of Commerce believes that an early childhood development system that supports children, families, and businesses within our community is such an investment, with the data showing our long-term return to the community averaging between 12 and 16 percent.

The Branch County Great Start Collaborative is housed within the Chamber of Commerce offices so it is viewed in the community as an economic development initiative, and business representatives serve on the board.

The Auditor General's report on Michigan's Childcare System raised some troubling issues regarding shortcomings in the management of Michigan's child care program. Quality childcare is far too critical to our workforce and the resources for these services are too scarce for any level of fraud or waste to be tolerated.

As troubling as the Auditor's report was, it has provided an opportunity to review the way the child care services are managed and to put in place a set of strategies, that if implemented properly, will place child care services on much more solid footing and will ensure that child care funding is used efficiently for its intended purpose.

We applaud the Department's efforts to improve the processes for doing background checks; to cross check provider reported hours to the reports of parents; and to more carefully review high risk child care cases. In our Great Start Collaborative work in Branch County, we are working to improve all aspects

of our early childhood system. Childcare is an important component of our early childhood system and of our economic base. We believe the current efforts of the DHS will help us and other communities to more fully integrate these important services into our comprehensive approach.

We recognize that with the significant changes being made, there are cautionary concerns being raised. As these new processes are put in place, it will be important to constantly monitor, and if necessary, modify to assure that the system is fair to both child care providers and parents. With good communication between the Department and those affected at the community level, we can move to a more efficient system that is more responsive to child care needs throughout the state and fulfills its intended purpose of a stronger workforce.

Thank you.